

# Descriptions of War and Healing by Karen Refugees on the Thai-Burmese Border

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## Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenological realities of war, trauma and healing by highlighting community-based conceptions and descriptions of war and healing by Karen refugees, who are situated along the Thai-Burmese border. The Karen refugees are one of the ethnic minorities in Burma that are being displaced as a result of intensified efforts by the Burmese military regime since the late 1980s. Based on the output of the different trauma healing workshops that I conducted inside the Karen Refugee Camp, I discovered that no matter how victimized they may feel about themselves, Karen refugees are capable of naming and responding to their collective sense of reality and can be active participants in their own healing and community building.

**Keywords:** American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Burma, healing, Karen refugees, Karen Women's Organization (KWO), refugees, resiliency, Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA), trauma, war pictures, workshop

In their discussion about interdisciplinary perspectives on violence and trauma, Suarez-Orozco and Robben (2000: 1) contend that large scale violence takes place in complex and over-determined socio-cultural contexts which intertwine psychic, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. In this context, violence, according to the authors, cannot be reduced to a single level of analysis because it targets the body, the psyche, as well as the socio-cultural order. Its consequences, which may take the form of massive trauma, afflict not only individuals but also social groups and cultural formations.

From the perspective of this article, the violence that Robben and Suarez-Orozco are referring to is an armed conflict between groups in the same country, particularly between the government military and armed opposition groups. The war has been frequently played out against a backdrop of subsistence economies, where people's ways of life are targeted and social and cultural infrastructures are destroyed. Many of the civilians in these war-affected communities are forced to settle in evacuation centers as internally displaced persons or in camps outside of their home country as refugees for fear of getting killed. Worldwide, there are millions of war survivors, and many have either become refugees or are internally displaced, needing to get through their trauma so they can recover and start rebuilding their lives and community (Fuentes, 2004: 491).

The definition of *refugee* is set forth in Article 1 of the United Nations (UN) Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (modified by Article 1 of the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees) as *any person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."* According to the *Training*

*Manual on Human Rights Monitoring* by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2001: 204), this definition of refugee has been expanded, particularly by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention on Refugees and the Cartagena Declaration, to include persons fleeing generalized violence: international war, internal armed conflict, foreign aggression or occupation, severe disruption of public order, or massive violations of human rights, in the whole or part of the country of nationality.

In this article, I will explore briefly the phenomenological realities of war, trauma and healing among Karen refugees who are situated along the border between Thailand and Burma. I will use the term, *war pictures*, to refer to people's descriptions or ways people make sense of their war trauma, which I believe are profoundly shaped by the socio-cultural and historical setting they inhabit. War pictures, in this context, are my way of presenting and discussing the trauma of war and displacement from an interdisciplinary perspective. There are, at least, five general categories of war pictures that participants in the workshops that I facilitated identify, namely: 1) Physical or material; 2) Cognitive-emotional; 3) Behavioral; 4) Socio-cultural and relational; and 5) Religio-spiritual categories, respectively.

Simply put, the physical or material category refers to the effects on how people feel about their bodies and on their material resources, properties, including public infrastructures. The Cognitive-emotional category refers to the effects on what people know and how people think and feel about the whole war experience, which has led to their displacement. The Behavioral category refers to the effects on how people act and react as individuals and as a community in light of the experience. The Socio-cultural and relational category refers to the effects on people's social bonds, their sense of communality, and sources of support. The Religio-spiritual category refers to

the effects on people's beliefs, including their meaning-making. I would like to emphasize at this point, that all categories of war pictures are very much interrelated in terms of their effects or influence on people. As shown under the Results section of the article, these war pictures are very much interconnected. They are very much embedded in people's stories or narratives. What I am saying is that people never compartmentalize war pictures, but rather present them as parts of their respective stories.

The Burmese government army offensive against its minority opposition groups has caused massive displacement of the civil population. In the case of the *Karen refugees*, one of the ethnic groups in Burma, constituting 6.2% of the 47 million population, as of July 2006 survey (CIA, 2007), together with the Burman (69%), Shan (8.5%), Rakhine (4.5%), Mon (2.4%), Chin (2.2%), Karrenni (0.4%) and many other ethnic minorities (Dundas, 2005). Most of them have been displaced as a result of intensified efforts by the military rulers since the late 1980s. According to the Global IDP Database (2002: 43), it is estimated that there were between 600,000 and one million internally displaced peoples in Burma by the end of 2001, of which close to 170,000 had resettled as refugees in Thailand alone by 2005. Of those registered refugees with the Ministry of Interior (MOI) of Thailand, Karen comprise 65% of the refugee population, followed by Karenni (18%), Tenasserim (10%), Mon (3%) and 4% representing other ethnic groups such as Kachin, Irrawaddy, Magwe, Mandalay, Pegu, Rakhine, Rangoos, Sagaing and Shan (TBBC, 2005).

The input in this paper is based on the trauma healing workshops that I facilitated at five different campsites inside a Karen refugee camp. The first series of workshops took place in February and March 2003 with more or less fifty participants. The workshops were sponsored and organized by the Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA), a non-government organization (NGO) based in

Tokyo, through the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in San Francisco, California. The SVA has been working with Karen refugees for many years now. The second series of workshops were held between January and April 2005 with more than sixty participants. This time, I was conducting a community study for my doctoral dissertation with the help of SVA and the Karen Women's Organization (KWO). Those attending the workshops were mostly librarians, primary school teachers, community leaders, and health workers who committed themselves to facilitating local-based trauma healing workshops for their colleagues and their own people. The majority are women and mothers. They wanted to start integrating trauma healing into their community programs and activities inside the camp (Fuentes, 2004).

## Workshop Description and Objectives

During my first visit to the Karen refugee camp in 2003, I was interested to know what the refugees' conception and articulation of their war experience was and what their coping and healing mechanisms were. One major question that I found myself being confronted with was, "How are we able to address and process people's collective traumas so that they may continue to find meaning and purpose in life?" As mentioned in my other article (Fuentes, 2004: 494), I was very much aware of the intensity of violence that Karen refugees have gone through and the dynamics of the massive trauma which characterizes their collective experience as a people. Such awareness of violence and trauma was very important because it helped me design the trauma healing workshops in a way that would reflect their sense of reality and elicit a local-based conception and expression of war experiences, including the coping and healing mechanisms of Karen refugees.

During the workshops in 2003 and 2005, all participants explored community-based warviews and coping mechanisms within their respective socio-historical and cultural contexts in an attempt to better understand their social reality as a traumatized community. They told stories and experiences of war and how it made them become displaced. Images and memories of war, which include attacks on their villages by the Burmese army, the destruction of property and farmland, including the loss of their sense of safety and security, among others, and the emotions that go with them, were shared. For the participants, the experience of telling and retelling their stories and listening to what the others have to say, and in the process finding commonalities in terms of shared experiences is freeing and validating. “By listening to others tell their stories, we are able to understand better our own personal stories,” they said. Participants also felt a strong support network among themselves. Their stories connected them to one another. This is what they would like to sustain and nurture even after the workshop, that is, to be able to continue sharing their stories in whatever way possible. In the workshops, they also highlighted individual and societal resiliency, which will be explained at the end of the article.

As mentioned above, I use an *elicitive approach* in gathering information about people’s warviews and resiliency that is contextual, where the refugees themselves and their knowledge are seen as “the primary source for the study” – whether or not they initially see themselves as such (Lederach, 1995: 56). What is meant by knowledge-as-resource is the implicit but rich understanding people have about their setting, which includes their knowledge about how war emerges, how it develops and affects them as a community, and how they try to handle and manage its effects.

## Workshop Framework

The workshops that I facilitated on both occasions involved, at least, four phases. Phase One deals with community-building processes that involved the welcoming of all participants, the sharing of expectations and setting up of community guidelines. The goals, the objectives as well as the schedule of activities were also presented during this phase. Phase Two involves the presentation of the general picture of war and trauma as experienced by the participants through sharing their personal and collective narratives and by locating where they were in the stories. This process is designed to enable participants to understand the socio-psychodynamics of trauma as they experience it. Some of the issues discussed during this phase involved the actual war, the attacks on their villages, the experience of being displaced, the cycle of violence and victimization, frustration-aggression, and collective identity. Perceptions, feelings and behavior that surround the issues were also dealt with.

Themes and topics on resiliency, coping and healing comprise the third phase of the workshops. Here participants were asked how they saw and understood the process of recovery and healing. The subject of societal resilience was also highlighted as well as other forms of community-based coping mechanisms. The whole theme of peace as that which characterizes the quality of life, not just the absence of war came out to be the most common dream that participants wanted to experience in their lifetime. The fourth phase involves short range planning in terms of what to do after the workshop and how it can be integrated into their daily work responsibilities within the camp. Participants also dealt with the issue of what it means to be trauma healing

facilitators particularly in the role of wounded healers.

Other methods used during the workshops, in addition to storytelling, include individual and group sharing/discussions, personal and group reflections and presentations, intra and interpersonal relationship-related activities, scenario-building exercises, group games and singing; and group planning. There were a total of five interpreters and translators whom SVA and KWO hired to help me in facilitating the workshops since I do not speak the Karen language.

## Results

### *Trauma for the Karen*

The phases I have mentioned helped in realizing one of the objectives during the workshop, which was to come up with working definitions of *trauma* and *healing* from the perspective of the Karen refugees. Part of the result shows that for Karen refugees, trauma is described as *tatubakawba erkawmelaw*, which is written as one word in Karen. Translated into English this means *Scar of Suffering*. When I asked them why *scar* – why not *wound of suffering* instead – they said that using the word, *wound* for what they have gone through as refugees does not capture the intensity of their experience. *Wound* to them does not give justice to their overall experience, they said. There are times, argued one participant, when a wound will be gone. *Scar of suffering* will always remind them of the experience that they have gone through at one point in their lives and that they are dealing with in one way or another. A scar to them also implies *remembering* their suffering, something that they can never forget. Phu Ta Moo, an 85 year old man whom I interviewed in 2003 said that



*scar of suffering* per se does not mean anything at all. It has to be presented and explained within a particular context, that is, the experience of the Karen as a people, which, according to Phu, goes back to their being persecuted under the Burmese Kings and also during the British regime and today under the current Burmese military regime.

War pictures for many Karen refugees reflect the multiple traumas that they are going through, which make life even more difficult. The fact they have been uprooted from their homeland as a community is something that many of them are still having great difficulty comprehending. On the basis of my conversations with workshop participants in different campsites both during my 2003 and 2005 visits and with the help of the interpreters, I gathered some of the information presented here. They remember grim images of heavy militarization and looting of their household belongings. Those who have witnessed the burning of their houses and the destruction of farmland are still shaken by the horror of the event. The disintegration of family ties and the disappearance of loved ones and relatives, continue to cause them terrible pain, deep sadness and anger. Many continue to grieve over the destruction of public places and symbolic infrastructure and the pain of being deprived of public assembly and other forms of social gathering even within the camp.

Indeed, their traumas did not end when they arrived in the camp because many were suffering from various forms of illness, hunger, and extreme poverty. There was no promise of employment. Since the 1980s, they have relied on rations that international organizations extend to them. This dependence has contributed to low self esteem, feelings of withdrawal and resignation. Some committed suicide while others feel they want to avenge what has been done to them. While most are desperate to go back to their homeland and be reunited with their families, relatives and friends, yet some continue to ask the most

fundamental question: Why us? Such powerful and intense articulations of people's trauma are what constitute their war pictures.

The majority of Karen refugees are Christians, and so many continue to hope and have faith in God in the midst of adversities. They pray that someday they will be able to go back to Burma and rebuild their Karen community and live in peace. Being able to hope against the backdrop of displacement is part of Karen's societal resiliency.

### *Healing for Karen*

During the workshops, I also discovered what healing means to them. For the Karen, healing is *tamablagay*. "Trauma healing," therefore, in Karen is *tamablagay tatu bakawba erkawmeilaw*.

*Healing*, according to Karen participants connotes social, economic and political implications. In fact they use terms such as rebuilding, reconstruction, the absence of war and transforming the negative impact of conflict into something beneficial, for healing. If translated into concrete terms, this would mean having food on the table, jobs for everyone so families will have income, education for children, dialogue between government leaders and representatives of various opposition groups in Burma, good and effective governance and being able to go back to their homeland, to name a few. These new emerging concepts and expressions of healing imply that collective and individual healing is not only a medical concept but also embrace peacebuilding mechanisms and frameworks (Fuentes, 2006).

## Discussion

By understanding the dynamics of people's trauma through the various categories of warviews, Karen refugees realize that community trauma healing does require a spectrum of prevention and assistance services which may be at four different levels (Int'l. Rescue Committee, 1999): society-at-large (the country of Burma), their immediate community (the Karen refugee camp), the families, and the individual. There is a need to ensure safety and security on the societal level while inculcating a positive social identity that will encourage active social participation. They recognize the need to increase solidarity and social integration on the community (campsite) level by creating socio-economic programs that augment family income and encourage use of traditional healing, which is accessible to all. As a community, they feel the need to recapture and observe once again the community rituals and celebrations that they used back in their home country. They find it difficult to observe community rituals because they are not allowed to hold social gatherings inside the camp. In one of the campsites that I visited, for example, all gates around the campsite are padlocked in the evening. Everybody must be in their assigned campsite or face interrogation by the military guards (Fuentes, 2004).

Since many want to be reunited with their family members and relatives they need to have programs for family reunification and measures that support parents and children in their family pursuits. Family therapy and individual counseling are also needed. At the bottom of these levels lie the meeting of basic human needs: security, in terms of enough food supply, clothing, shelter, education, and a respect and recognition of their identity as a people.

Practitioners and scholars like John Burton, Richard Rubenstein, Dennis Sandole, John Paul Lederach and Richard Wagner, to name a few, have underscored the importance of satisfying people's basic human needs as part of healing.

Karen people know that implementing some of these major coping mechanisms is beyond their political capacity as refugees. What they would like is for the international community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to work hand in hand in an attempt to truly address the psychosocial, economic and political problems and needs of the community.

At present, there are very few studies being conducted on community-based trauma healing. This has resulted in a rapid spread of *Western* cultural trends towards the medicalization of distress and an overwhelming expansion of psychological therapies, which appear to ignore the local traditions, meaning systems, and active priorities of war-affected communities. By "Western," Nisbett (2003: 48) refers, especially to Northern Europe, and the present and former nations of the British Commonwealth, including the United States. I would like to emphasize that there is nothing inherently wrong with the *weaving together* of these concepts and articulations, as Barry Harts suggests, if there is respectful listening, analysis and care on all sides.

The point indicated above is reinforced in a recent study conducted by Derek Summerfield on *posttraumatic stress* in such places as Bosnia and Rwanda. Summerfield (1999: 1449) argues that for the vast majority of survivors posttraumatic stress is a pseudocondition, a reframing of the understandable suffering of war as a technical problem to which short-term technical solutions like counseling are applicable. These concepts, Summerfield contends, aggrandize the Western agencies and their 'experts,' who define the condition and bring the cure, usually with total disregard for local healing

practices or traditions and other community-base coping mechanisms. Foster and Skinner (1990 as quoted by Summerfield) support this claim by describing how former political detainees in South Africa, for example, framed their stories in terms of themes relevant to their own calling and values – biblical, legal, political, humanist. Today, however, many practitioners in the field of trauma healing from North America are aware of the multi perspectives of the psycho-social dynamics of war traumas, and are now integrating into their programs and practice various cultural approaches in trauma healing. Some of them are my colleagues from the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University.

What I would like to emphasize in this article is the fact that no matter how victimized they may feel about themselves, Karen refugees are capable of naming and responding to their collective sense of reality and can be active participants in their own healing and community building, as results of the workshops suggest. In fact, what helps many refugees find meaning in their life, in addition to the assistance they receive from NGOs, is their sense of individual and societal *resiliency*, which from a social and political standpoint, is defined by Apfel and Simon (2000: 103) as people’s capacity to survive violence and loss, and, moreover to have flexibility of response over the course of a life time. Apfel and Simon (2002: 125) consider, at least, six characteristics which mitigate aggression and contribute to resiliency, namely:

1. *Resourcefulness, which includes* the gift of being able to extract human warmth and loving kindness in the most dire of circumstances, including at time from enemies or persecutors;
2. *Curiosity and intellectual mastery, the ability to conceptualize, and generate knowledge* which provides an important sense of activity rather than passivity;

3. *Flexibility in emotional experience*, in terms of not denying or suppressing major affects as they arise, and the ability to defer or defend against some overwhelming anxiety or depression when emergency resources are needed;
4. *Access to autobiographical memory*, which is the ability to remember and invoke images of good and sustaining figures, usually parental figures, even if these images might at times be critical and demanding as well as warm, loving, and encouraging;
5. *A goal for which to live, a purpose* or task which permits one to find a way to survive. This intertwines with a sense of empowerment and diminished helplessness;
6. *Need and ability to help others*, altruism or “learned helpfulness,” which draws upon identification with parents who themselves have instantiated the effectiveness of altruistic acts; and
7. *A vision of a moral order* and the possibility and desirability of the restoration of a civilized moral order, which may be crucial to survival and rebuilding community.

Applied in day-to-day life, the above characteristics may be expressed in terms of acceptance of reality and submitting themselves and their situation to God, reading the Bible, praying, creating a support system by encouraging each other to tell their stories and experiences for many believe that telling their stories is healing. They get involved in community health and education programs by attending workshops and seminars and by teaching children in schools and training parents and adults in sewing, pottery-making, bread-making, gardening, and others. Some compose poems and original songs that reflect their present situation and their dreams. Families and neighbors gather together during early evenings over cups of coffee or tea and share stories (Fuentes,

2006). The Karen refugees also have the perseverance to continue hoping that someday they are all able to return to Burma and start anew. Their dream of a future reality gives Karen refugees something to look forward to despite the odds. Hence, they devote their efforts while at the camp by learning new knowledge and developing new skills that they can utilize once they are back in Burma.

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## 泰緬邊境之克倫難民對戰爭和療癒的敘述

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### 摘 要

本文從位居於泰緬邊境的克倫（Karen）難民的經驗出發，藉由突顯他們社區對戰爭和療癒的概念與描述，探討現象學上有關戰爭、創傷和療癒的實境。這些克倫難民是緬甸的少數民族之一，緬甸的軍事政權自 1980 年晚期開展密集作為，迫使這些難民離開家園。筆者在克倫難民營中進行不同的創傷療癒工作坊，發現不論克倫難民對其自身感到多麼痛苦，他們都可以說明及回應其對實境的集體意識，同時也可以在他們自己的療癒和社區發展中，成為主動的參與者。

關鍵字：美國公誼服務委員會（AFSC）、Shanti 國際志願者協會（SVA）、克倫婦女組織（KWO）、緬甸、克倫難民、難民、創傷、自癒力、療癒工作坊、戰爭圖像